

Field Experience: Facilities Audit

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For my Facilities Audit assignment, I completed a project as part of my internship. During a City Council meeting in February, the Mayor and City Council asked the Superintendent for school capacity numbers at each of the 4 buildings in the division. The numbers the City Council had been relying on were only rough estimates. Since the student population had been declining in recent years, they had not had cause to worry about expansion. There had been no push to worry about the capacity of the schools in the division. Now, however, there are some new neighborhoods being built within the school division. Some community members had raised concerns about whether the existing school buildings could handle the projected increase in students as families move into the new neighborhoods.

The City Council had questions about how those numbers might affect the schools. I was tasked with looking at how spaces across the division were actually used at each building and, applying a formula from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), to determine a “realistic capacity” for each building. This task consumed a surprisingly large amount of time since the formula from the NCES required an understanding of how each classroom in each building was typically used.

For example, self-contained special education rooms are only assigned a capacity of eight students. Yet, the school maps I had access to did not label any rooms as “self-contained special education rooms”—in fact, division policy is to follow an inclusion model for special education. However, as I talked to assistant principals from each building, I learned that several rooms in each building *were*, in fact, used primarily for pullout special education services, such as small-group testing or reading tutoring.

This was a small example of what I found throughout this process: labels on the map did not tell the full story. There was a significant difference between how rooms were labeled and how spaces were actually used. I suspect this concept would hold true across most divisions, making it important for division leaders to understand that actual capacity and “realistic” or “functional” capacity are two different concepts. This is important for matters like population growth, but it is equally important when considering how staffing changes and organizational models may be affected by physical capacity. Deciding to restructure the middle school into interdisciplinary teams, for example, might not work if one of the supposed-math classrooms on a wing is actually being used as a meeting room for teachers’ professional learning communities. In short, this field experience was further evidence that it all depends on which frame you use to look at a problem.